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HOW THE COGNITIVE SCIENCES MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO THE THEOLOGICAL DEBATE ABOUT FREE WILL

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Abstract

This article argues that recent results of the cognitive sciences could make significant contributions to theological debates about free will, but they have been largely ignored by contemporary systematic and philosophical theologians. Recent work in cognitive psychology and moral psychology has to do with our intuitive and automatic patterns of reasoning in the domains of freedom and responsibility. This research will be relevant for many theological domains and has the potential to raise new issues and problems. The essay examines three such domains. First, the debate between intellectualist and voluntarist accounts of the will have been central in theology. Recent findings suggest that intellectualist accounts of the will have more intuitions on their side than has been previously assumed. Second, theologians have debated whether belief in free will is central for moral and political life. This question was pertinent during the Reformation when many of the reformers either rejected free will or presented truncated accounts of it. Recent results from moral psychology suggest that belief in free will has significant pro-social and altruistic effects. Finally, the possible compatibility of divine determinism and free will is crucial for theological debates about sin, grace and God's providence. Recent psychological results point in the direction of affirming that while most humans have strong intuitions about the incompatibility of free will and divine determinism, these might be based on a false inference. Finally, some new counterintuitive challenges about the manipulativeness of God are raised against the divine determinist position.

Introduction

Free will is a perennial theological topic. It is of crucial importance for Christian theology, since it cuts through almost all traditional dogmatic *loci*, spanning from the doctrine of God (God's will) to sin, grace and theological anthropology in general. The topic is difficult and divisive: free will has been among the most central issues dividing theological traditions and denominations. One only needs to look at the Reformation as an example. Today, these issues are extensively discussed in analytic philosophical theology. This is partly because free will is a cottage industry in English-speaking analytic

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philosophy. In the interest of making my own standing explicit, I should say that I operate in this context as well, so I will find most of my discussion partners there.

What I seek to do in this article is to demonstrate how recent work in the cognitive sciences—broadly construed—might enrich the theological debate about free will and even make a significant contribution to it.[1] First, I will discuss the definition of free will and how recent studies might contribute to the theological discussion on the conditions of free will. Second, I will outline some results about the significance of free will. Finally, I will examine how the results of the cognitive sciences might be relevant to the debate between theological compatibilists and incompatibilists.

The Cognitive Sciences and Free Will Skepticism

To begin, we should distinguish four questions about free will.[2] First, we ask for the definition of free will or the conditions required for it. What is it and what is it about? Second, we ask why free will matters at all. If it has very little significance for us and our lives, why bother debating the issue? The third question is the most classical one—the compatibility of free will and various forms of determinism. Many have found it initially plausible to think that if determinism were true, humans could not have free will. Finally, there is the question of whether human agents ultimately have free will. I am convinced that the cognitive sciences are relevant for answering all these questions.

Let us begin, rather backwardly, from the last question. Most Christian theologians affirm that humans are morally responsible and have free will, at least in some sense. Of course, there is significant disagreement over the conditions of free will and whether it is compatible with determinism. Nevertheless, theologians have been reluctant to reject free will wholesale. Against this, most contemporary skeptical arguments against free will invoke some results of the cognitive sciences and neuroscience. Although things have changed in the last decade or so, results of the cognitive sciences have often been taken to support some form of free will skepticism or another.

The skeptical threat can be formulated as follows. As we will soon see, a crucial condition of free will is the existence of some mental states associated with the agent that play an explanatory role of some kind in making sense of the agent's actions. In other words, the intentions, beliefs and goals of the agent make a difference with respect to the actions of the agent. However, a number of neuroscientists and cognitive scientists have presented results suggesting that the connection between our consciously accessible mental states and our actions is much looser than we ordinarily assume. Indeed, some have maintained that our consciously accessible mental states make no difference whatsoever in terms of our actions. If our mental states would turn out to be *epiphenomenal* with respect to our actions in this sense, it would be difficult to see how we could have free will.

Some skeptical arguments have their roots in the neurosciences. Most famously, neuroscientist Benjamin Libet conducted a series of experiments about how conscious

[1] I construe the cognitive sciences very broadly here. They are an umbrella for various approaches, theories and research programs that seek to study how information-processing systems work. As such, the cognitive sciences involve neurosciences, cognitive psychology, computer science and evolutionary psychology. For an introduction, see, e.g., Keith Frankish and William Ramsey, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[2] Michael McKenna and Derk Pereboom, *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 4.

decisions are temporally related to measurable brain events. Without going into the details, Libet-style experiments involve the measuring of brain activity in some way (EEG, fMRI) and its timing in relation to the conscious decision to act. The act measured in the experiments is usually something like basic motor movement, like flexing of one's hand, such as in the original Libet experiment.[3] The surprising finding in the original study was that there is an activation of the motor cortex 400 milliseconds before the subject became aware of her conscious decision to act. One skeptical interpretation of these results (and more contemporary ones) is that the conscious decision to act is not the cause of the action, but rather an effect of the triggering of the motor neurons, which takes place prior to consciousness.

Neuroscience is not the only source of skeptical arguments. A number of psychologists and cognitive scientists have pointed out that there is substantive evidence for thoroughgoing *automatism* in human action and cognition. Not only does consciousness not have access to many action-generating cognitive mechanisms, but conscious explanations of action are often post-hoc rationalizations. Instead of being under direct conscious control, our actions are in fact products of cognitive mechanisms that take very little input from conscious processing.

Psychologist Daniel Wegner summarizes this work and argues that our conscious feeling of being the sources of our actions might be mistaken. A number of experiments show that our source experience can be manipulated. We can act voluntarily without having conscious experience of doing so and the experience of acting can be induced in us, while we are in fact acting involuntarily. This means that the source experience is not a direct apprehension of the agent being the source of her action but rather an unconscious inference. Invoking both cognitive psychology and neuroscience studies, Wegner argues that these inferences are mostly mistaken. Our unconscious cognitive mechanisms are not only the sources of our actions, but also the source of the conscious feeling of acting.[4]

These skeptical challenges have sparked an extensive scientific and philosophical debate that is still ongoing. While the issue of free will skepticism is highly relevant for theologians, it will not be the main focus in this article. The reason is that there is much high-quality "apologetic" work responding to the skeptical challenge already available and it seldom tackles the specific questions theologians are interested in. In addition, I am personally convinced that the skeptical challenge is mostly a failure. Here are some reasons why I think this is the case.

First, as philosopher Neil Levy points out, neuroscientific experiments measure the timing of the conscious decision to act. When such a decision is not found prior to some brain event, the skeptic concludes that there are no actions that are consciously initiated. However, there is no reason to think that a conscious decision immediately prior to action is really needed for free will after all.[5] Indeed, many of our stereotypically free actions are such that a direct, conscious decision to act or initiate the action is missing. Instead, it is enough that our actions are products of intentions and beliefs that can be consciously accessed or controlled at some point in time or other. In this sense, Libet-style experiments fail to show that conscious mental states are disconnected from actions.

[3] For classical experiments, see, e.g., Benjamin Libet, "Unconscious Cerebral Initiative and the Role of Conscious Will in Voluntary Action," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 8 (1985): 529-66.

[4] Daniel Wegner, *The Illusion of Conscious Will* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

[5] Neil Levy, *Consciousness and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24.

Second, in his extensive critical analysis of Libet-style experiments, philosopher Alfred Mele points out that in Libet-style experiments the actions of the subjects are rather simple motor behaviors, like flexing one's hand. Such behaviors are a far cry from complex moral and deliberated decisions. So, even if it turns out that consciousness lags behind simple motor behavior, this says nothing about consciousness being bypassed in those complex decisions that are stereotypically associated with free will.[6] To support this point, there is some evidence suggesting that the readiness potential of the motor cortex tracked in Libet-style experiments is not even triggered in the context of complex, deliberated decisions. So, it seems that conscious deliberation activates a different set of brain mechanisms than arbitrary, simple motor behavior.[7]

Regarding the automaticity challenge of Wegner and others, both Levy and Mele invoke a number of results suggesting that conscious intentions and decisions make a significant impact on human behavior. Consciousness in general plays a significant role in planning future actions and in producing flexible and responsive action. In addition, consciousness is implicated in many cases of moral decision-making.[8] Moreover, Levy points out that while automaticity is indeed a thoroughgoing feature of our cognition, this does not mean that automatic cognitive functioning is "dumb." As we will soon see, some accounts of free will require that free actions be rational. Such rationality is possible even in situations where consciousness has very little to do with the initiation of actions. Mele adds to this by pointing out that there is significant evidence for the efficacy of conscious decisions. In a meta-analysis of almost a hundred studies, psychologist Peter Gollwitzer and others found that when subjects committed themselves to various future actions, their behaviors tended to differ from those who did not make the same kind of commitment.[9] What people decide to do clearly matters for their actions.[10]

Even if we conclude that the aforementioned skeptical challenge fails, there is something important it can teach theologians about how free will works. It turns out that many of our decisions, choices and actions are driven by causes that are ultimately beyond our direct control and causes we have trouble identifying introspectively. The role of consciousness is more of a supervisor overseeing the work of many different subordinates than that of a king who directly dictates actions. These conclusions support those theological accounts of sin which suggest that there are certain aspects of our moral character that are difficult or impossible for us to control. Our deep motivations and moral goals might be fixed by factors beyond our control to such an extent that some acts of God would be necessary in order to change them. As we will soon see, this is just one possible way in which theologians working within the Augustinian tradition might find the sciences supporting their view.

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[6] Alfred Mele, *Effective Intentions: The Power of Conscious Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[7] See, e.g., Uri Maoz et al. "Neural Precursors of Decisions that Matter–an ERP Study of Deliberate and Arbitrary Choice," *eLife* (2019) https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.39787

[8] Levy, *Consciousness*, 77-79.

[9] Mele, *Effective Intentions*, 135-36.

[10] For discussion, see Susan Pockett, William Banks, and Shaun Gallagher, eds., *Does Consciousness Cause Behavior?* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006); John Baer, James Kaufman, and Roy Baumeister, eds., *Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Andy Clark, Julian Kiverstein, and Tillman Vierkant, eds., *Decomposing the Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

What Is Free Will?

In addition to providing evidence for or against the existence or non-existence of free will, the cognitive sciences can be relevant for theology in other ways, namely, they can tell us how people actually reason about free will, moral responsibility and related notions. Researchers are tracking and identifying inference patterns and information processing tendencies that normally operate outside conscious awareness. In the jargon of the field, these are referred to as "intuitions," "intuitive inferences" or "folk theories." The results are relevant, because theologians and philosophers sometimes invoke everyday intuitions in support of their arguments. It is often assumed, for instance, that most people would intuitively reject the compatibility of free will and determinism. Should we not test such assumptions?[11]

For now, let us focus on those intuitions and folk theories regarding the nature of the will in general and free will in particular. It is not at all clear what the phenomenon of free will actually is, or if there even is such a thing. There are a number of different starting points in current philosophical literature. First, many take the phenomenon of free will as essentially linked to moral responsibility.[12] More specifically, an action of an agent must be freely performed if the agent is justifiably to be held morally responsible for it. In other words, free will is a necessary condition for moral responsibility. Usually, moral responsibility requires another condition to be met as well, namely, an *epistemic condition*: the agent must have access to relevant knowledge. Free will is the other condition, sometimes called *control condition*. So, free will is an ability or power of persons to have control over their actions in a way that allows for the attribution of moral responsibility.[13] It is easy to see how these conditions work in practice: we are held responsible for actions that we have done voluntarily and knowingly.

Peter van Inwagen, for instance, has argued that the question of free will is a question about whether making choices is compatible with possibly true, metaphysical features of our world (like determinism).[14] It is typical for humans to think that when we make a choice, there are alternative futures open to us. The future is like a garden of forking paths unfolding in front of us and our choices determine which of these forking paths become actual.[15] Van Inwagen is surely right in the sense that this garden of forking paths picture often drives the debates about free will in many contexts. If it turned out that this picture was false and we had no access to alternative courses of actions, moral responsibility would be difficult to conceive. If I have no choice, I cannot be blamed, or so it seems.

The phenomenon of free will has to with the fact that some actions (and decisions and intentions) seem to be "up to us" and others do not. Without this up-to-usness it is difficult to see how humans could be morally responsible for their actions. Now, we should ask what this up-to-usness actually requires, that is, under what conditions our actions are up to us. According to the most minimalist and modest view, up-to-usness consists of an agent acting according to her intentions and beliefs without external or internal compulsion. The agent is in control of her actions, when those actions are voluntary

[11] There are reasons to tread carefully here. By providing evidence that one view is more intuitive than another, one has not given reasons to think the former view is true and the latter is false. Many intuitive inferences turn out to be false.

[12] See e.g., Kevin Timpe, *Free Will: Sourcehood and Its Alternatives*, second edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

[13] McKenna and Pereboom, *Free Will*, 6.

[14] Peter van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 8.

[15] Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, third edition (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 2009), 253-54.

(intended by her) and not products of outside influence. Some philosophers add to this and maintain that an agent must have the capacity to evaluate and be conscious of her reasons for actions. Let us call this *free will light*. Many who defend the compatibility of determinism and free will gravitate towards this way of understanding free will.

Some take a stronger view: in addition to free will light, an agent must be capable of choices that are in some way or another underdetermined, such that the agent has alternative possibilities available to her at the moment of decision or sometime before that. According to this *free will regular* position, the world needs to be such that our brains, histories and perhaps even the micro-physical structure of the world work in an indeterministic fashion. Without this indeterminism, there would be no choice that is truly up to us to make. Finally, there is the *free will premium* view. Here, even deep openness is not enough: in order to exert control over an action, the agent herself must be the ultimate source of "the springs of her action." An agent's actions have their source in her intentions, goals and tendencies rooted in her character. In order to be truly free, an agent must, therefore, be responsible for these as well; an agent should be the creator and sustainer of her own goals. Traditionally, theologians have argued that human agents are non-physical souls: because they stand outside the natural world, they are not subject to prior causes, like bodies and brains, thus guaranteeing this kind of ultimate responsibility.[16]

All three views seek to capture the everyday up-to-us conditions of free will. We could now ask what the everyday view actually is. The research is still ongoing and there is no overall consensus on the matter. However, some interesting results have already emerged. In a recent article reviewing experimental results, Andrew Monroe and Bertram Malle draw a conclusion that goes against the grain of much philosophical and theological reflection. As I already mentioned, sometimes free will is associated with a metaphysical view of the self as a soul. However, there is some evidence suggesting that everyday intuitions about free will go in another direction. According to Monroe and Malle, two-thirds of the subjects associated free will with making choices and decisions; the other two phenomena mentioned were "doing what one wants" and "acting without constraints." No clear correlation between belief in souls or metaphysical selves and belief in free will emerged in their studies. Monroe and Malle conclude that

> These preliminary data cast doubt on the characterization of people's concept of free will as magical and metaphysical. Instead they suggest that the ordinary understanding of free will is rooted in the folk concept of intentionality (especially the components of desire and choice) and extends beyond it by also considering internal and external constraints on behavior.[17]

If this is correct, it points away from the free will premium position—especially if we take it to be entailing a commitment to mind/body dualism. Monroe and Malle also suggest that "people don't seem to demand that the agent could have (in an otherwise parallel reality) acted differently; what matters is that in this reality the agent made a choice and that choice caused the action."[18] Given this scenario, people seem not all that interested in

[16] Robert Kane is the most well-known representative of free will premium view. See, e.g., Robert Kane, *The Significance of Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[17] Andrew Monroe and Bertram Malle, "Free Will without Metaphysics," in *Surrounding Free Will: Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience*, ed. Alfred Mele (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 29.

[18] Monroe and Malle, "Free Will," 42.

whether the alternative possibilities condition is filled or not. This result points away from the free will regular view, where alternative possibilities are taken as necessary conditions of free will.

Perhaps the free will light approach is the most intuitive position among the three outlined above. This would already be theologically relevant, maybe even striking. A number of theologians and philosophers assume that our everyday, folk view of free will takes choices and decisions to require indeterminacy either prior to the decision or at the point of the decision (free will regular or free will premium). Let me just take one example. Defending a Christian view of persons as *Imago Dei*, philosopher J. P. Moreland states

> It is widely acknowledged that worldwide, the commonsense, spontaneously formed understanding of human free will is what philosophers call libertarian freedom: one acts freely only if one's action was not determined—directly or indirectly—by forces outside one's control, and one must be free to act or refrain from acting; one's choice is 'spontaneous', it originates with and only with the actor.[19]

Moreland goes on to argue that our everyday view is incompatible with naturalism, since naturalism cannot allow for spontaneous actions: our decisions and choices are just links in a continuous chain of causation. A theistic metaphysics is a better fit for our everyday view of agency than a naturalist one, because it can account for agents standing outside continuous causal chains. Thus, Moreland assumes that some combination of agent causation and mind/body dualism is the default folk position. As we have seen, the experimental results suggest that it is not at all clear that our everyday view is as Moreland describes it. If it is the case that the commonsense view is not unambiguously 'libertarian,' as Moreland puts it, the central premise of his argument is unfounded. Perhaps it is an intuition among professional analytic philosophers that choices require indeterminacy, but it is by no means clear that non-philosophers think in this way.

Some philosophers have even suggested that "free will" is a philosophical construct because there is nothing more to the everyday notion than the rather normal psychological processes of intending, deciding and acting. Philosophers use this notion to refer to a number of metaphysical, as opposed to everyday, problems and this double usage creates confusion. According to van Inwagen, for instance, free will in everyday parlance is simply about the voluntariness of a specific action. My doing something "out of my own free will" simply means that I did it voluntarily. As opposed to this, philosophers and scientists tend to use free will as a title for various compatibility problems, like the incompatibility of determinism and choice, for instance.[20] These problems might easily lack an intuitive *sitz im leben*, or so the argument goes. This conclusion would be supported by the results Monroe and Malle have reviewed: our everyday notion of free will refers to voluntariness of actions in different contexts.

The interpretation of the results of Monroe and Malle might be more complicated than it would initially appear. First, there is some evidence suggesting that the principle of alternative possibilities matters under certain conditions. Sometimes people do indeed assume that the ability to do otherwise is required for moral responsibility. If correct, this would challenge the simple conclusion that the free will light view is more intuitive than

[19] J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant* Imago Dei*: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 41.

[20] Peter van Inwagen, *Thinking about Free Will* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 192-96.

the free will regular position. As this issue is related to the question of compatibility, I will return to it later in more detail. Second, there is some evidence suggesting that mind/body dualism of some kind or another is rather intuitive for humans. According to some studies, it is easy for humans to separate the subject of mental states (the person) from the subject of biological and physical states, which would lend some support to the idea of the self or the soul being separate from the body.[21] While Monroe and Malle did not find a correlation between belief in free will and belief in souls, there might, nevertheless, be some kind of intuitive link between dualism and free will. This might have to do with the status of the subject of intentions and beliefs, the self, but further experimental research is needed here.

Reason and Will

These experimental findings are relevant for theology in yet another way, regarding the debate between intellectualist and voluntarist views of the will. Historically, theologians have disagreed as to how reason and will are related.[22] This arose as a central theme in medieval philosophy in the debates between Thomists and Scotists, for example. Very roughly, the intellectualist thinks that reason provides evaluations of the extent to which some goal or desire is in accordance with the good. The will subsequently moves the person to action according to the evaluation of reason. Only to the extent that human reason is able to identify the good, the proper end goal of desires and intentions, does the will act accordingly.[23] Against this, the voluntarist maintains that the will can also initiate spontaneous actions that are somewhat independent from the outcomes of reason's evaluations. Free actions are not necessitated by prior evaluations and reasons, but the will retains the ability spontaneously to make up its mind. Given contemporary terminology, this would count as a strong version of the alternative possibilities condition, free will regular at least.

If Monroe and Malle's overview of the current research is correct, many of our everyday intuitions are on the intellectualist side, favoring more Thomist accounts of freedom rather than voluntarist ones. Choices and decisions humans make have their roots in their intentions and goals, which are, in the stereotypical case, products of reason. In order to explain human actions, there is no need to refer to a power of the will to generate spontaneous actions and decisions. The results of cognitive psychology of human decision-making and action generation point to another conclusion relevant for the theological debate about will and reason. While there are good reasons to reject the skeptical conclusion of Wegner and others, this still leaves us with a massive amount evidence regarding the pervasive nature of automaticity in human cognition and the limitations of conscious control of actions. All this casts doubt on our capacities for generating actions in the way that free will premium requires. Having ultimate sourcehood, for instance, seems to require that an agent have deep and full control over her

[21] Matthias Forstmann and Pascal Burgmer, "Adults Are Intuitive Mind-body Dualists," *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 144, no.1 (2015): 222–35.

[22] Toivo Holopainen, "Will and Choice in Medieval Thought," in *The Sourcebook for History of the Philosophy of Mind: Philosophical Psychology from Plato to Kant*, eds. Simo Knuuttila and Juha Sihvola (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014), 549-50.

[23] For a defense of the rationalist view, see e.g., Jesse Couenhoven, *Stricken by Sin, Cured by Christ: Agency, Necessity, and Culpability in Augustinian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Couenhoven calls this view "normative freedom."

own moral character. But this kind of control, especially in moral matters, is very fragmented and provisory at best, as far as the current research is concerned.[24]

Recently, Jesse Couenhoven has drawn out the implications of this claim for theology. Couenhoven argues that human lives are subject to various forms of luck and contingency that are independent of our own agency. Our moral decisions are very sensitive to environmental conditions and specific social contexts, as contemporary psychology so aptly demonstrates. He writes:

> The difficulty for the libertarian is that the beliefs and cares that motivate our choices do not themselves generally appear to be products of significant choices. Even important decisions . . . are deeply shaped by environmental cues and social currents that we have not chosen and that we often fail to comprehend. Our decisions about these topics find their source in conceptions of self and good life over which we have, at best, limited volitional control. How then can we achieve independent self-determination?[25]

It seems that the sources of an agent's actions are seldom in the control of the agent. Rather, the agent's tendencies and abilities depend mainly on upbringing, parents, their genes, the surrounding environment and involuntary psychological tendencies. That is not to say that there is no control over action. Rather, it is to point out that this control is made possible by factors that are, for the most part, not under the conscious control of the agent. Couenhoven calls this the scarcity problem: even if humans were capable of occasionally acting in such a way as to satisfy the conditions of the free will premium view, most human decisions and choices do not fulfill such conditions. In other words, spontaneous choices contributing to one's character and overall goals are really rare. If one is preliminarily committed to free will and moral responsibility, this fact is a reason to reject the free will regular view but especially the free will premium position.

Why Free Will Matters

It is unfortunate that theologians seldom explicitly address the issue of the significance of free will. In recent philosophical discussions on free will skepticism, however, the topic has been the focus of a lot of attention. Looking at the significance of free will can help us to understand what is at stake in the debate.[26]

As I already mentioned, many philosophers see an intimate connection between moral responsibility and free will—so much so that free will is often defined as the control condition for moral responsibility. So, this is the first reason why free will matters: it is difficult to see how anyone could be held morally responsible if there were no free will. Free will is also implicated in many theories of moral development and moral virtue. A virtue-based account of moral life looks meaningful insofar as a person can have some measure of conscious control over her character. Furthermore, free will seems to be crucial for highly-valued human relationships. Loving someone seems to require a conscious commitment to certain kinds of attitudes and actions towards the one who is loved. Similarly, complex human moral relational attitudes, like shame and repentance,

[24] For various examples of such phenomena in the case of moral cognition, see e.g., Christian Miller, *The Character Gap: How Good Are We?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[25] Jesse Couenhoven, *Predestination: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 152.

[26] One central contribution to the discussion is Kane, *The Significance of Free Will*.

look groundless without free will. Finally, it is difficult to imagine what guilt and forgiveness might look like if no action whatsoever were really up to us. How could I blame myself for a morally wrong action if that action were not really up to me?[27] All of this is theologically significant. Theologians almost universally assume human moral responsibility and the possibility of moral development. Christian life clearly involves deep attitudes and emotions connected to relationships with others. It seems impossible even to imagine an account of Christian spiritual and moral life without the notions of love, repentance, guilt and forgiveness. Yet, these attitudes are, arguably, dependent on there being some kind of free will.

It should also be added that for many theologians and philosophers, free will is crucial for the project of theodicy. Indeed, current interest in free will in philosophy of religion can be traced to Alvin Plantinga's free will defence and the subsequent discussion. Some have even suggested that the contemporary shift towards libertarian accounts of free will (as opposed to the more historically prevalent compatibilist accounts) is precisely because of the debate about theodicy.[28] This link between free will and theodicy might have significant effects on the debate in the philosophy of religion. If libertarian accounts of free will are increasingly challenged, this might introduce further pressure towards theologians and philosophers to turn towards theodicies that do not rely either on free will regular or free will premium positions.

Regarding the psychological significance of free will, recent studies have found interesting connections between belief in free will and how people regulate their moral life. More specifically, studies suggest that belief in free will contributes to a wide range of pro-social behavioral tendencies. In a recent survey of experiments, social psychologist Roy Baumeister and others present the following findings.[29] First, studies point to a connection between self-control and belief in free will. When the participants were primed with material undercutting free will, they tended to exhibit increased aggressiveness, conformist tendencies, willingness to punish outsiders and refraining from helping and cooperating with others. One of the first studies on this front was that of Kathleen Vohs and Jonathan Schooler more than a decade ago. What they noticed was that when participants were primed with material undermining free will, they tended to cheat more and present their actions in a more favorable light.[30] Baumeister and others take these results as confirming that

> . . . belief in free will motivates people to think and act autonomously, and so they put in their mental effort to consider alternative courses of action that could have brought different consequences. Conversely, disbelief in free will may offer an appealing excuse for people to be lazy and not bother to consider alternative actions and outcomes.[31]

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[27] This is not to say that moral responsibility and important relational attitudes would have to be completely abandoned if there were no free will. See e.g., Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency and the Meaning of Life* (New Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014).

[28] Daniel Speak and Kevin Timpe, "Introduction," in *Free Will & Theism*, eds. Kevin Timpe and Daniel Speak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4-7.

[29] Roy Baumeister, Cory Clark, and Jamie Luguri, "Free Will: Belief and Reality," in *Surrounding Free Will: Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience*, ed. Alfred Mele (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 61-64.

[30] Kathleen Voss and Jonathan Schooler, "The Value of Believing in Free Will: Encouraging a Belief in Determinism Increases Cheating," *Psychological Science* 19 (2008): 49-54.

[31] Baumeister et. al. "Free Will: Belief and Reality," 62.

Surprisingly, moral self-regulation was not the only behavioral effect of undermining people's belief in free will. Studies have also revealed a connection between belief in free will and experiencing life as meaningful and fulfilling. People who find their life meaningful tend to believe in free will. Conversely, when people's belief in free will is undermined, they tend to report that their lives are less meaningful. Studies also found that undercutting people's belief in free will had an effect on their willingness to set long-time goals and act in pursuit of them.[32] These effects are probably because experiencing one's life as meaningful requires a sense of control over one's life and life projects. Insofar as my life is not up to me and I cannot direct it by setting long-term goals, the life is no longer *mine*. So, it makes sense to see it as less meaningful.

One conclusion that could be drawn from this research is that one's belief in one's possibilities of making a difference is crucial for one's moral motivations. In other words, the stronger the belief in an individual's own agency and the possibility to change things, the more pro-social the individual will be and the more meaningful she will take her life to be. This conclusion should give theologians significant pause. In an especially precarious position are those who deny free will exists altogether, and those who maintain that our moral and spiritual life is not up to us. Whenever we say that something is not really up to us, we are simultaneously undermining motivational reasons for that action. If a theologian says, for instance, that faith in God is not really up to us, this will intuitively undercut the motivation to strive towards strengthening or trying to obtain faith. Similarly, if we hold that everything that happens is, ultimately, up to God, this, again intuitively, undermines moral motivations to do better, since it is not ultimately up to us anyway. These inferences might certainly be false and the theological case for the compatibility of determinism, providence and free will might be very strong. Regardless, accepting an abstract theological argument does very little to change people's intuitive responses. It might turn out that people reflectively adapt "theologically correct" views based on theological teaching but intuitively respond differently. In other words, belief in divine determinism and thoroughgoing providence might be very difficult for people to live by.[33]

The experimental results are particularly problematic for those theological views that deny free will. Famously, Martin Luther argued against human free will in his *De Servo Arbitrio*. Luther takes free will to require the ability to do otherwise such that it is incompatible with any kind of prior necessity. In our terminology, he affirms free will regular and premium conditions. The problem, however, is that humans do not actually meet these conditions. Humans are unable to do otherwise (free will regular), because everything is made necessary by God's omniscience. Because God knows the future infallibly, everything happens necessarily.[34] Further, humans lack significant control over "the direction of their will," i.e., what they want. Instead, either God or the Devil ultimately controls their will.[35] Luther concludes that humans have no free will; only God is able to fulfill the conditions of free will. In our terminology, this means that while humans have the ability to act freely on the basis of their intentions and goals (free will light),

[32] Ibid., 64.

[33] There is evidence that many different kinds of theological correctness does affect religious thinking. See D. Jason Slone, *Theological Incorrectness: Why Religious People Believe What They Shouldn't* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[34] Ernst Winter, trans. and ed., *Desiderius Erasmus and Martin Luther: Discourse on Free Will* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 112.

[35] Ibid., 115-16.

they have no control over their ultimate character and desires. Thus, humans cannot carry ultimate responsibility (free will premium).

Luther's famous volume is a response to Erasmus of Rotterdam, who had earlier criticized Luther's views. One of Erasmus' arguments is a political one: people should believe in free will because otherwise they would not bother to strive to act morally. Belief in free will serves an important social and moral function, and Erasmus is worried that Luther's vehement criticisms of free will might lead to unwanted moral and political consequences.[36] Furthermore, Erasmus also argues that if there were no free will at all with respect to, say, human moral actions and faith in God (that is, these actions were not up to us in any sense), it would be difficult to see how God could hold us morally accountable for sinful and evil actions, on the one hand, or praise the saints for their goodness, on the other. If I cannot in any way contribute to the moral nature of my actions, then holding me responsible (blaming or praising) for my moral actions is unjust.[37] Against this, Luther maintains that humans are morally responsible even though they lack free will. God is in His rights to hold humans responsible for their sinful actions while humans could not have avoided these actions, nor could they have shaped their characters in a better direction.

Given the empirical evidence presented above, Luther's views are more counterintuitive than Erasmus'. As Baumeister points out, belief in free will significantly contributes to overall moral and social behavior. Given these findings, Erasmus is right to worry about the moral and societal effects of Luther's teaching. Preaching against free will might have significant negative moral consequences. Moreover, Erasmus is more in line with intuitive human reasoning when he maintains that we cannot be reasonably held morally responsible for actions and omissions that are not up to us in any sense. Baumeister and others have provided a number of experimental results that point to a close connection between belief in free will and the tendency to adopt attitudes of moral responsibility.[38] If belief in free will is systematically undermined, there might be significant drop in our tendency to hold each other responsible.

Theological Compatibility Problems

Another issue that arises from these social scientific findings is the compatibility question, namely, the relationship between divine determinism and human free will. Traditionally, philosophers and theologians have identified and addressed a number of theologically-motivated compatibility problems, not just one. In order to propose solutions to these problems, one must decide what conditions free actions should fulfill, that is, which one of the positions above is correct (free will light, regular or premium). The truth of divine determinism could rule out some conditions but not others. Understandably, divine deterministsts, like Luther, have gravitated towards free will light rather than regular or premium, since divine determinism is easier to reconcile with views of agency that do not require alternative possibilities or deep control over one's moral character.

By divine determinism, I refer to a variety of views according to which God's will, knowledge or actions are such that they necessitate (or determine) all created facts,

[36] Ibid., 16-17.
[37] Ibid., 87.
[38] Baumeister et. al. "Free Will: Belief and Reality," 64-66.

including free actions of creatures.[39] By compatibility problems, I am referring to situations where the belief in human free will is seemingly incompatible with some other, purportedly crucial theological commitment which involves God's determining or necessitating a specific outcome. Let me just mention three such problems.

The first is the classical problem of God's foreknowledge and human free will. If God's knowledge of the future includes future human actions and God cannot under any circumstances be wrong, then it seems that humans are not free in terms of their future actions. God's knowing my future action seems to make it inevitable somehow.[40] As I already mentioned above, Luther used God's foreknowledge to argue for divine determinism. Another compatibility problem is that of grace and free will. If God's giving of grace to me is not up to me in any sense, then I have no control over whether I am saved or not. However, if God's giving of grace to me is not up to me in any sense, then it seems unjustified to hold me morally responsible for acting sinfully, since I could not have acted otherwise. This problem seems to undermine God's righteousness in punishing people for something that was not up to them in the first place.[41] Finally, the third problem is also extensively discussed in contemporary literature. This has to do with God's providence and universal causality. Many early Christian and medieval theologians affirmed God's universal causality according to which all created events are ultimately caused by God. To be sure, created substances have the power of secondary causality, but nothing in creation is separated from God's primary causality. When this view of divine causality is combined with a thoroughgoing account of providence, a powerful compatibility problem arises. It is difficult to see how human actions can be free in any meaningful sense if they are part of God's necessary plan and thus caused by God.[42]

One possible explanation for the prevalence of these problems in theological reflection is that there is something cognitively intuitive about them. In other words, the compatibility of free will and divine determinism might be counterintuitive. But what exactly is counterintuitive about this relation? Traditionally, philosophers have maintained that the incompatibility is based on the alternative possibilities condition. Divine determinism—or any kind of determinism, for that matter—is a threat to free will because it makes our choices necessary, thus removing access to alternative possibilities. Recently, however, more attention has been directed towards the issue of sourcehood. What matters in free choice might not be the ability to do otherwise but the agent's ability to be the source of her actions, that is, to have control over the psychological conditions (character, intentions) that give rise to her actions. If determinism were true, the sources of the agent's actions would not be in the agent herself but independent of the agent and outside the agent's control. We should highlight this distinction between leeway conditions of free will (alternative possibilities) and sourcehood conditions.[43]

[39] There are many issues regarding the definition of divine determinism. For the details, see e.g., Peter Furlong, *The Challenges of Divine Determinism: A Philosophical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[40] One discussion of this complicated issue is Linda Zagzebski, *The Dilemma of Freedom and Foreknowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[41] Kevin Timpe provides a sophisticated discussion on this and offers a solution in his *Free Will in Philosophical Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[42] One recent treatment of this problem is W. Matthews Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality: The Dual Sources Account* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).

[43] Kevin Timpe, "Leeway vs. Sourcehood Conceptions of Free Will," in *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, eds. Kevin Timpe, Megan Griffith, and Neil Levy (London: Routledge, 2017), 213-24.

So, there are two ways for the compatibility problem to arise: either determinism takes away our leeway freedom by removing alternative possibilities, or it takes away our sourcehood by removing our control over the sources of our actions.

Diverging Intuitions about Compatibility

There is a complex theological debate revolving around various compatibility problems. On the one hand, theological incompatibilists reject divine determinism because it is in tension with what they believe to be correct conditions for free will (regular or premium). Against this, theological compatibilists maintain that free will is compatible with divine determinism because God's necessitating or determining human psychological events does rule without overriding our free will.[44] These disagreements emerge often in the debate about the nature of God's providence. Many Calvinists, for instance, hold that God's providence is comprehensive, namely, that every fact, including free human actions, is fixed by God's unchanging will. They then proceed to defend a free will light position as the correct condition for free will which allows them to hold on to human moral responsibility.[45] Against this, critics maintain that in order for humans to be responsible, free will regular is required. Since free will regular is incompatible with comprehensive divine providence, God's providence must be such that there is leeway for creaturely choices.[46] Let us now see what the cognitive sciences have to contribute to the debate.

One crucial contribution has already been mentioned. Contrary to what some theologically-motivated incompatibilists think, it is not at all clear that our everyday notion of free will requires alternative possibilities or ultimate sourcehood. These results are good news for theological compatibilists. However, the situation might be more complicated than this. There is an extensive experimental literature on the compatibility problem and the overall picture remains messy. There might be tendencies that make incompatibilism surprisingly intuitive after all, especially in the case of divine determinism.

Summarizing a series of experiments, philosopher Eddy Nahmias suggests that our intuitions are mostly on the compatibilist side. In these experiments, participants were presented with different kinds of deterministic scenarios involving, for example, genes or supercomputers determining human behavior. The participants were then asked to make responsibility judgments of actions performed by people who inhabited such worlds. The answers tended to point towards intuitive compatibilism: if internal psychological states of the actors in the stories were involved (they intended to perform the actions they did and were not coerced), the actors were taken to be responsible for their actions even in deterministic worlds. However, when directly confronted with compatibility cases, the participants tended to think that determinism and free will are mutually exclusive. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that belief in the incompatibility of free will and determinism described abstractly is rather universal.[47]

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[44] For contributions from both sides, see e.g., Timpe and Speak, *Free Will & Theism*.

[45] See e.g., Paul Helm, "God Does Not Take Risks" in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion*, eds. M. L. Peterson and R. J. VanArragon (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 228-37.

[46] See e.g., Bruce Reichenbach, *Divine Providence: God's Love and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016).

[47] Eddy Nahmias, "Intuitions about Free Will, Determinism, and Bypassing" in Robert Kane, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 555-76.

Interestingly, Nahmias suggested that this intuitive incompatibilism about choice might be based on an implicit inference that is false. Through a series of ingenious experiments, Nahmias has attempted to show that what is going on in these cases is what he calls "bypassing." The bypassing inference is a false assumption that if determinism were true, our normal decision-making mechanisms and volitions would be "bypassed," that is, they would not be involved in generating actions.[48] So, people do *not* reason like this: "if determinism were true, I would have no choice, so I would not have free will." Instead, they reason like this: "if determinism were true, my intentions, beliefs and decisions would have no bearing on my actions, and therefore I would not have free will." However, as Nahmias points out, even if the former inference were true, the latter most certainly is not. The truth of determinism is compatible with the fact that the agent's intentions, beliefs and decisions are part of the causal mix.

Studies also suggest that there is significant context-sensitivity in compatibility intuitions. When presented with abstract, morally neutral scenarios with low emotional content, the participants tend to be incompatibilist, that is, they tend to infer that determinism rules out moral responsibility. However, when presented with more concrete, morally and emotionally loaded scenarios, people see no conflict. The more concrete the scenario, the less determinism matters and ordinary psychological notions of choice and intention take over.[49]

Shaun Nichols proposes a possible explanation for why people have conflicting intuitions about the compatibility of free will and determinism. He suggests that compatibility problems are created by a clash of two distinct cognitive systems. On the one hand, humans have a set of cognitive mechanisms geared for producing explanations across multiple domains. Folk physics and folk biology produce explanations of the movements of physical objects and the behaviors of animate entities. Folk psychology is a distinct set of systems designed to deal with agents and, among other things, provide intentional explanations of agents' actions. All these systems operate on the assumption that there are explanations to be had in all these domains. The deliverances of folk psychology, for instance, support the belief that all human actions, as well as choices and decisions, do indeed have explanations. This makes it intuitively plausible that individual choices always have some explanation in terms of prior factors (intentions, reasons, beliefs). On the other hand, there is our conscious source experience that seems to suggest that even when there are overwhelming reasons on one side, we have the ability to choose otherwise.[50] John Searle directs our attention to the gap, which exists between our reasons for action and the action itself. In order to describe human actions, we cannot describe them as a sequence of events only. There is a rational self that operates in the gap between reasons of action and the action itself. This is how we experience our own actions, according to Searle.[51] If this is correct, our experience of our own decision-making seems to draw us in the incompatibilist direction, whereas the "explanatory compulsion" of our cognitive system tends toward the compatibilist direction.

[48] Ibid., 561-68. Not everyone has agreed with Nahmias' interpretation of his results. For a critical take on bypassing, see Gunnar Björnsson, "Incompatibilism and 'Bypassed' Agency" in *Surrounding Free Will: Philosophy, Psychology, Neuroscience*, ed. Alfred Mele (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015), 95-122.

[49] Shaun Nichols, *Bound: Essays on Free Will and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 77-82.

[50] Ibid., 17-32.

[51] John Searle, *Freedom and Neurobiology: Reflections on Free Will, Language, and Political Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 50-58.

Nichols goes on to suggest that our experience of making underdetermined choices might not be a reliable source of how we actually make choices, so we should not ground our incompatibilism on this experience, as Searle does. Nichols writes:

> For we know that introspection misses out on causally important influences. Thus, even if there are deterministic factors that cause our decisions, we cannot expect introspection to tell us. So the fact that we don't introspect a set of deterministic factors doesn't provide grounds for believing that there are not deterministic factors.[52]

As I have already suggested, one of the central results of cognitive psychology of human decision-making is that there are various causes involved in these processes that are, for the most part, opaque to our consciousness. This undermines the evidential force of the first-person source experience: even if it seems to me that my decisions are underdetermined by prior causes, I cannot justifiably believe this simply on the basis of my experience, because introspection alone does not have access to all possible causes.

These discussions raise interesting and challenging problems for theologians. Theological incompatibilists should avoid grounding their incompatibilism on introspection, experience and intuitive incompatibilism. As far as we know, our intuitions about the incompatibility of choice and determinism might be based on a false inference about "bypassing" and our experience of underdetermined choices might be mistaken. This is, again, good news for the theological compatibilist and defender of God's comprehensive providence. If incompatibilist intuitions have a dubious source in a mistaken inference or unreliable introspection, their evidential value is clearly diminished. However, even if their evidential value for the case for theological incompatibilism were minimal, the intuitions would not go away. Because of our experience of making undetermined choices, the picture of the future as a garden of forking paths is very difficult to set aside. If the determinist is correct and people indeed could make choices and be morally responsible under divine determinism, he would still have to give up the garden of forking paths picture. This, in turn, might make the comprehensive view of providence difficult to grasp intuitively. Whatever happens will end up looking like fate or destiny.

Manipulation Difficulties for Divine Determinists

What I have suggested so far is that studies point towards conclusions more favorable to theological compatibilists than to their incompatibilist rivals. The most crucial result here is that our intuitions regarding the incompatibility of choice and determinism might be wrong. At this point, the incompatibilist could object by pointing out that the studies that Nichols and Nahmias have conducted and cited are about the compatibility of causal or physical determinism and free will, not about divine determinism at all. So, the question is whether there is an intuitive difference between divine determinism and causal determinism. Many theologians, especially in the Calvinist and divine determinist camp, have wanted to draw such a distinction. Theologian Hans Madueme, for instance, argues that while free will is incompatible with causal or physical determinism,

[52] Nichols, *Bound*, 52.

it is compatible with divine determinism. Causal and physical determinism entails that humans are simply parts of a causal chain that has its roots in events outside their control. This is not true of divine determinism:

> . . . theological determinism (i.e. divine causal determinism) as I define it does not entail physical causal determinism. When God decrees sin, his sovereign rule does not operate as one among many other "intramundane" causes (creaturely causes that exist within the nexus of our world). Divine ordination operates on a different level from creaturely, intramundane causation.[53]

Divine determinism is different from physical determinism because its operative principles are not just causes among other causes in the created world. Instead, God is related to creation like an author to a story, orchestrating it from the outside. God's action in necessitating and causing created events differs so much from causation in the created world that it poses no threat to free will.

Philosophically, this issue is rather complicated and I cannot treat it in any detail here. However, I will suggest that while distinguishing divine determinism from causal determinism might be philosophically warranted, it comes with a high counterintuitive cost in practice. There is some experimental evidence suggesting that, given everyday reasoning, it might be *more* difficult (rather than less difficult) to reconcile divine determinism with free will than with other forms of determinism. This is because divine determinism involves an agent, God, that is the source of relevant necessities. The fact that another agent is involved in and orchestrating the situation triggers a strong intuition that humans are not ultimately responsible after all—an intuition that is not triggered in the case of causal determinism. Divine determinism makes God intuitively look like a puppet master or a manipulator.

In the philosophical context, these worries have emerged in the debate about manipulation arguments for incompatibilism. Manipulation arguments come in many types but they share a common structure. First, they seek to produce the intuition that when an agent is massively manipulated by someone to perform a certain action, the agent is not morally responsible for that action. This is, plausibly, because that agent is no longer the source of her action in this case; it is rather the manipulator who is responsible for it. Second, the arguments attempt to show that the same feature that makes us think that the agent is not responsible in the manipulation case is also present in the case of determinism being true. In other words, if free will is incompatible with manipulation, it is incompatible with determinism as well because determinism entails manipulation.[54]

Consider Alfred Mele's manipulation story that directly appeals to the manipulation intuition. It involves an omnipotent and omniscient goddess Diana and Ernie (a human person Diana wants to perform an action at a certain time).

> Diana creates a zygote *Z* in Mary. She combines *Z*'s atoms as she does because she wants a certain event *E* to occur thirty years later. From her knowledge of the state of the universe just prior to her creating *Z* and the laws of nature of her deterministic universe, she deduces that a zygote with precisely *Z*'s constitution located in

[53] Hans Madueme, "From Sin to the Soul: A Dogmatic Argument for Dualism", in *The Christian Doctrine of Humanity*, eds. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 86.

[54] For an overview, see Kristin Mickelson, "The Manipulation Argument" in *The Routledge Companion to Free Will*, eds. Kevin Timpe, Megan Griffith, and Neil Levy (London: Routledge, 2017), 166-78.

> Mary will develop into an ideally self-controlled agent who, in thirty years, will judge, on the basis of rational deliberation, that it is best to *A* and will *A* on the basis of that judgment, thereby bringing about *E*. [. . .] Thirty years later, Ernie is a mentally healthy, ideally self-controlled person who regularly exercises his powers of self-control and has no relevant compelled or coercively produced attitudes. Furthermore, his beliefs are conducive to informed deliberation about all matters that concern him, and he is a reliable deliberator.[55]

Then Ernie goes on to perform *E*.

In my own case, I have to admit that the intuition of excusing Ernie from the responsibility for bringing about *E* is pretty strong. I find it rather appealing to conclude that Ernie cannot be held responsible for *E*, because Ernie's *A*-ing had its roots outside Ernie, in the deliberate plans of Diana. The problem is not that Diana takes away Ernie's choice, it is rather that Ernie does not seem to be the source of his actions.

The Calvinist philosopher Guillaume Bignon has argued that such cases do not constitute a problem for Christians, however, since the Christian God is not like Diana. God does not meddle in zygotes and engage in any kind of manipulation or coercion.[56] But I am not sure this will solve the problem. It is true that the temporal distance between God's actions is greater than in the case of Diana. It might also be true that God might not micromanage zygotes to achieve his goals. Nevertheless, God does, if divine determinism is true, create a world where he intends events like *E* to happen via Ernie. God's decreeing or willing Ernie's action takes place "in the beginning of the world," so to speak, at the moment of creation. God's mechanism of making Ernie to *A* to make *E* necessary would be different from that of Diana but the sourcehood issue still stands: Ernie's bringing about *E* has its sources in God, not in Ernie, and so it seems plausible to excuse Ernie from responsibility for *E*.

Manipulation arguments for incompatibilism are very relevant for theologians, since they offer an intuitively plausible way to undermine the compatibility of divine determinism and free will.[57] In his discussion of manipulation arguments, Peter Furlong admits that there might be a significant intuitive cost in accepting divine determinism. This would be to give up on the intuition that massive manipulation removes responsibility.[58] The divine determinist might have to bite the bullet here and claim that people like Ernie are responsible for their actions, even while many people find it intuitively implausible.

Biting this bullet could be very demanding because there is evidence suggesting that our intuitions about agents manipulating other agents are rather deep-seated and strong. Recent studies have found that participants tend to mitigate responsibility in manipulation situations where other agents are present. Nichols describes the studies of Jonathan Phillips and Alex Shaw, who conducted a series of experiments to investigate how people respond to various vignettes describing situations of manipulation. They concluded that participants had a strong tendency to withhold blame when the manipulation was done by an agent as opposed to situations where the manipulator was not

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[55] Alfred Mele, *Free Will and Luck* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 188.

[56] Guillaume Bignon, *Excusing Sinner and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 31-32.

[57] For discussion, see e.g., Furlong, *The Challenges of Divine Determinism*; Bignon, *Excusing Sinner and Blaming God*.

[58] Furlong, *The Challenges of Divine Determinism*, 82.

an agent at all but rather a set of circumstances.[59] Nichols takes this to be good news for the causal determinist. If manipulation arguments lead us intuitively towards incompatibilism and this is because the manipulator is an agent, our intuitions might not be reliable in cases where there is no manipulator, namely, in the case of non-theistic causal determinism. Hence, the intuition that determinism involves manipulation is based on a faulty inference regarding agents. The road is now clear for naturalist compatibilists because they have no puppeteer in the picture. This way of debunking intuitive incompatibilism regarding manipulation is not available for the divine determinist, however, since she most certainly has a manipulating agent in the picture, God. The divine determinist will have a hard time trying to convince people that they are responsible for sin and evil and that God is not. God will, intuitively, look very much like a puppeteer even if there were a good case for the compatibility of human moral responsibility and God's overall providence.

Concluding Remarks

My basic argument in this essay is that the cognitive sciences are relevant for theological debates. I began by reviewing cases where theological arguments invoke intuitions in support of their premises, but have questioned whether those intuitions might be unreliable or not so widely shared as previously thought. As I see it, this is the case for a number of intuitions invoked in support of both the free will premium and regular positions. I have also suggested that belief in free will serves important social and moral functions that are crucially important for theologians. This is why straightforward denials of free will on theological grounds might result in a number of unwanted moral consequences. These points, I submit, contribute to multiple theological discourses on free will.

In addition, the scientific results reviewed above will shape the theological debate about divine determinism in terms of its dialectic. Oftentimes, the debate about divine providence, for instance, assumes that the incompatibilist position is the most intuitive and therefore the onus is on the determinist to show why her counterintuitive stance is true. The burden of proof, so to speak, rests on the determinist's shoulders. However, the results above suggest that the determinist has more intuitions on her side than previously assumed. There might well be equal or even more intuitive support for compatibilism than incompatibilism, certainly more than many philosophers of religion think.

Moreover, the findings from social scientific studies provide a reason to shift the locus of the debate. Traditionally, the alternative condition—leeway freedom—has been at the center of the debate. The question has been whether divine determinism is compatible with human free choice. The centrality of the sourcehood intuition and the possible unreliability of our intuitions about choice demonstrate that this might not be the core problem after all. The issue of sourcehood—whether the agent's mental states (beliefs, intentions, goals) are involved in the decision-making process—might be intuitively the most crucial. If this were the case, theologians should direct more attention to those arguments that challenge sourcehood, like various manipulation arguments. The problem

[59] Nichols, *Bound*, 91-92. Jonathan Phillips and Alex Shaw, "Manipulating Morality: Third-Party Intentions Alter Moral Judgments by Changing Causal Reasoning," *Cognitive Science* 39 (2015): 1320-47. See also, Dylan Murray and Tania Lombrozo, "Effects of Manipulation on Attributions of Causation, Free Will, and Moral Responsibility," *Cognitive Science* 41 (2017): 447-81.

with comprehensive providence, therefore, might not be that it seems to remove choice but rather that it seems to bypass the person as a source of her actions.

I have also suggested that the results of cognitive psychology regarding human decision-making and choice offer support to those theological views that set the conditions of free will and moral responsibility rather low along the lines of the free will light position. Even if we were capable of free will premium (being sources of our own character and tendencies) or free will regular (choices underdetermined by prior causes), these capabilities would not be instantiated that often. Instead, most of our actions have their roots in causes that are ultimately out of our control. Our accounts of free will should reflect this fact or risk losing free will and moral responsibility altogether.[60] These findings fit well into a determinist-friendly story of human moral agency. Indeed, they support those theological views of the human will that have been labeled as intellectualist or Aristotelian rather than as voluntarist ones. However, I have also suggested that accepting intellectualist and compatibilist free will coupled with divine determinism might have a surprisingly high intuitive cost: one might have to admit that our deep-seated intuitions about manipulation are wrong.

If our intuitive ways of thinking about free will as outlined in this essay are close to the truth, it could be that no single theological account of free will is capable of reconciling or combining our various intuitions into a coherent whole. This would not be a surprise for a cognitive psychologist: our intuitions often turn out to be too context-sensitive and domain-specific to be easily systematized. Various thought experiments and other intuition pumps can be used to coax different responses out of participants. Consequently, whatever view we end up accepting on philosophical or theological grounds, there might be intuitions that have to be given up. Perhaps the reason free will is such a difficult topic for us is that every internally consistent theory leaves some relevant intuitions out and is thus, at least to some extent, counterintuitive.[61]

[60] For an interesting account of religious attitudes without free will, see Derk Pereboom, "Libertarianism and Theological Determinism," in Timpe and Speak, *Free Will & Theism*, 112-31.

[61] I would like to thank the anonymous referees for comments and feedback. The research for the article was graciously funded by the Academy of Finland.